

Letter from Lost Prairie

Rites of Spring

April 11, 2011

When you were all on campus barely 3 weeks ago Montana was still in the grip of winter. Slowly but discernibly the snow has begun to melt. There is now a large shallow lake just outside the cattle guard and the headwaters of the Fisher River are lapping at our road. Over the weekend some of our students went canoeing on the new lake. There are other signs of spring in the air: exquisite flashes of cerulean western blue birds, early meadow larks squatting on the fences and ubiquitous fat robins pecking for worms. I was amazed to see a flock of 50 swans on a vernal pond just opposite the Sky Dive air strip when I drove to work last week. Yet winter has not quite yielded to spring in Lost Prairie. Snow squalls have been coming and going, along with steady rain, for the past two weeks. So too the sun appears and disappears constantly throughout the day. At times it is snowing on one side of the lodge while the other side is bathed in sunshine. This is a time of restless anticipation.

The student council has prepared for the spring ritual of prom for some weeks now. Our American high school rite of passage takes place in the Marion firehouse and is attended both by all our Skyhouse students and campus students who reached Sun clan a few weeks ago. Decorations were ordered, formal attire rented or bought, meals and music planned. Our dedicated staff prepare a special dinner and do all the clean up. In many ways this is a modest event by current high school standards, held at a simple local venue and over by an early hour. Yet those who attend generally feel fortunate and almost always have a surprisingly good time. They are amongst friends whom they know well and enjoy the admiration of staff for their good looks and youthful vitality on the dance floor. It is for many a social high point of their stay.

The majority of our students have had difficulty with parties in the past. Many of them have suffered from significant social anxiety about how to manage themselves at such events. Some have chosen to avoid parties

altogether. Most have attended only when drunk or high. This is often the first time that they have managed to have fun while also staying sober.

Our current culture does not help. Our high school communities are out of control and adults turn a blind eye to students who drink excessively or get high. One friend told me that she always plans to stay home whenever there is a high school party to protect her home from the intrusion of uninvited guests who might trash her house. She even did so when buses were hired to take the students safely to and from the prom - two hours distance away. Adults make uncomfortable compromises. They prefer to allow their children to bring friends to drink in the safety of their homes rather than to have them sneak off in the woods with a keg or end up in some other house with drunken friends and absent parents. Alcohol poisoning and date rape are not infrequent occurrences at such events. Family friendships have been strained, and even destroyed, by ugly allegations between boys and girls when parents have trouble holding a consensus and are easily pitted against each other as they waver in support of their child's protested innocence.

College life is, if anything, worse in this regard. My own experience with three daughters at well known colleges was horrifying. Although they were no angels they managed to avoid the embarrassment of a journey to the ER for dangerous drinking – an all too common experience of college life. My youngest reported that her boyfriend was encouraged to drink an obscene amount of alcohol as part of his induction into the local Search & Rescue Team. When his companions had had enough of their revelry they left her to sit up with him all night to prevent him from aspirating. In 2007 a less fortunate Middlebury student, who had last been seen partying, disappeared on a February night. For weeks his parents and other searchers poked holes in every snow bank until the snow finally melted and his body appeared below the dam in Otter Creek. He had fallen drunk into the river. We all know of such stories and yet our children perceive excess drinking as a normal part of the college experience and feel entitled to “enjoy” it.

In December 2009 Ira Glass produced a radio program on *This American Life* focused on the culture of drinking at University of Pennsylvania. His reporter, Elaine Grant, talked with both students and adults in the local town and in positions of authority at the university. It was very clear that almost everyone considered wild drinking to be a “normal”, expectable part of college life, sanctioned by the adults, and enthusiastically

endorsed by the alumni who gathered before football games for tailgate parties with their underage children and contributed financially to their alma mater making it difficult to bring about any changes to the prevailing devil-may-care ethos. If the adults cannot bring themselves to care enough to change the culture how can we expect that students might do so.

Drinking is indeed a cultural matter. Malcolm Gladwell wrote an article on Drinking Games in the New Yorker in February 2010. He drew on the research of Dwight Heath, a Yale anthropology student who went to Bolivia to do his field work in the 1950s and observed the heavily ritualized drinking parties of the Camba, itinerant farm workers imbibing laboratory-proof alcohol and yet showing no evidence of argument, sexual or verbal aggression. This led to a questioning of the customary assumptions about the effects of drunkenness. Alcohol is commonly believed to relax us and reduce anxiety. This is not always the case. Studies now show that the principal effect of alcohol is “to narrow our emotional and mental field of vision” and “to remove the little constraining voice from the outside world that normally keeps our self-assessments in check.”(Gladwell, New Yorker Feb 15 & 22, 2010) One interesting suggestion arising from these studies is that people comport themselves in accordance with the norms and standards of their society. If our college communities expect and condone rowdy and rude behavior then drunks will act in this fashion. If we change these expectations then even drunks will follow suit. Americans often look to Europeans, especially the French and the Italians, for a model of decorous drinking in which wine, in particular, is drunk as a food and for pleasant social interaction with friends and family and is generally free from the excesses that we observe on US college campuses and elsewhere. Surely it is time for the adults to take charge of the culture which surrounds drinking, to ban beer pong, stop alcoholic hazing, “21 for 21” and crack down on uncivilized behavior.

Last week NPR recorded Joe Biden giving voice to the problem of sexual assault of young women. One in five women is assaulted at some point in her life, often while drunk. The number is certainly higher amongst our students. Biden highlights the attempt by the University of New Hampshire to change the campus culture both by empowering young women via a “Know your Power” program and by Bystander seminars which build empathy. He very clearly stated to young men that women are to be respected whether drunk, dressed provocatively or even when changing their

minds mid way into a sexual transaction. This is a serious grown up effort to do the right thing.

You are all aware that we believe that our students have the best chance of success if they commit to a year of sobriety after leaving campus. We hope that if they do so they can learn to find other ways to handle their anxieties in new environments and develop other ways to have “fun.” The pleasure that they experience at the Montana Academy prom is one of the building blocks which they will take with them to remind themselves that it is possible to enjoy the company of friends and collaborate with adults without the use of substances.

Warm regards,

